

Economic and Political Problems, 1820–1860

SUMMARY

Early promoters of the capital hoped it would become a great port and commercial city. They believed that its location on the Potomac River would make Washington the outlet for trade with the Ohio Valley and other western regions. When the promise of commercial traffic failed, people in Washington tried to improve their access to the west by building the Chesapeake and Ohio [C & O] Canal. After long delays, difficulties, and the spending of several million dollars, the canal was completed to Cumberland, Maryland, in 1850. But it was too late. The Baltimore and Ohio [B & O] Railroad had already reached beyond Cumberland and captured much western trade for the port of Baltimore. Industry also failed to gain much of a foothold in the capital, although new forms of transportation and a new public utility—gas—were introduced. Publishing and small service businesses flourished in Washington.

The city government functioned in a modest way between 1820 and 1860, although it had serious financial problems. Because of the city's investment in the C & O Canal, the government nearly went bankrupt in 1834. Local tax revenues were not adequate to cover costs of maintaining streets and to pay for other services. The city government could not remedy epidemics and problems of public health created by miserable sanitary conditions. Nevertheless, voters elected several effective mayors during the period. The police department was also reformed. In 1846, Alexandria and Alexandria County were **retroceded** to the Commonwealth of Virginia.

The federal presence grew stronger during the period. Congress helped the City of Washington by assuming the heavy C & O Canal debt. Federal engineers began construction of an expensive public water system, and federal authorities paid for other civic improvements. Since the city did not have a large industrial or commercial economy, its residents relied on the federal government or federal building projects for employment. The federal work force more than tripled between 1820 and 1860. The city's physical appearance was improved by construction of the Patent Office, General Post Office, and Treasury buildings—massive stone structures with white columns still standing today.

Main Ideas in This Chapter

1. In order to improve commerce, the people in Washington built the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal to open trade to the west. The failure of this expensive project, which stopped at Cumberland, Maryland, was in large part due to the success of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which crossed the mountains to the Ohio River Valley. The railroad resulted in Baltimore becoming the major commercial city in the area.

2. Several small businesses grew during this period, but major industry never gained a foothold in the capital.

3. The city had financial problems and there was disagreement over how much the federal government should help.

4. Alexandria and Alexandria County were retroceded to Virginia.

5. The federal government grew, more than tripling its work force between 1820 and 1860.



A view of Washington from the west bank of the Potomac River in 1838

- Did Washington ever become the important port city businessmen hoped it would be?
- Why did people want to build the C & O Canal?
- How did the attempt to build the canal affect the District of Columbia?

I. Failed Visions

The Vision of a Great Commercial City

Since before the capital's founding, men of vision had dreamed of the Potomac River as a natural trading route. They predicted that ports, such as Alexandria and Georgetown, at the head of ocean navigation on the Potomac would become commercial cities. George Washington chose the site of the national capital partly because he believed that a city here would attract a great deal of business and become economically self-supporting.

What happened to this dream is a complicated story. The capital did not become a great commercial center because other competitive cities moved ahead of it, because of natural barriers to seafaring commerce that quickly appeared, and because **capitalists** in the city had too little money to invest in the improvements necessary to bring trade. Another drawback was Congress's general reluctance to support the costs of local development.

From the late eighteenth century on, investors and engineers worked to improve Potomac River navigation. The Patowmack Company was one effort at such improvement. Completion of the Great Falls Canal in 1802, at much expense, tripled river traffic in the first year of operation. It did little, however, to improve navigation upstream. After years of trial and failure, the Patowmack Company gave up its efforts to increase river traffic.

Other problems in Washington frustrated the building of a great port. As more upstream land was put under cultivation and more

forests were cut down, erosion increased. Topsoil carried off by the river and its tributaries accumulated on the tidal side of the fall line, just where the ports of Georgetown and Washington City were planned as deep water harbors. To eliminate this problem, known as silting up of the river, expensive dredging would be necessary. Since no individual or group could afford to pay for dredging, the Washington City Canal filled with mud. Therefore, the ports on the Potomac could not handle bigger ocean-going ships.

In the 1820s the capital fell further behind other cities. In 1817 the state of New York and New York City began a vast engineering project, the Erie Canal. It would provide a single water-level route across New York State, connecting the west with the Hudson River and New York City. By 1825 the Erie Canal was finished, and it helped make New York City prosperous.

The Chesapeake and Ohio Canal

Shocked by New York's success, supporters of the Potomac realized that a new solution to their problems would be required. They also knew that the Potomac route to the Ohio Valley was shorter than the Erie Canal route. At a meeting in Washington in 1823, delegates from Maryland, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, the District, and the federal government agreed to plan a canal over the mountains to Pittsburgh. An estimated cost of more than \$22 million shocked the canal's supporters and compelled them to accept a shorter canal to Cumberland, Maryland, at a cost of \$4.5 million.

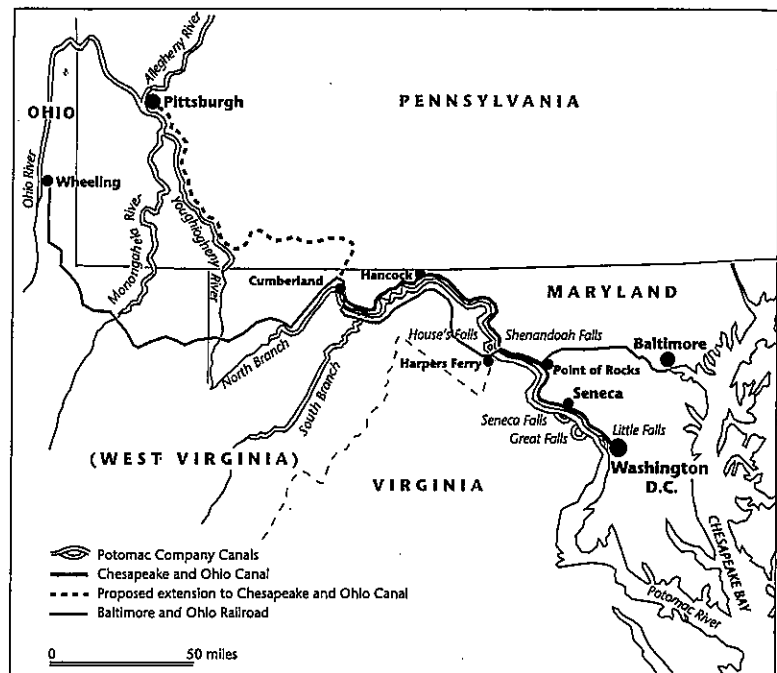
The cities of Georgetown, Alexandria, and Washington subscribed a total of \$1.5 million in C & O Canal Company stock. Congress authorized them to borrow money and levy taxes to pay interest on the loans until tolls from the canal could cover these costs. Better still was the U.S. Treasury's purchase of \$1 million worth of canal company stock. All concerned felt confident about



The C & O Canal Company borrowed money to build the canal and issued scrip to lenders. The company promised to pay interest on the loans.

The competition between the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad and the C & O Canal Company for the grain trade of the Shenandoah Valley was intense. Each wanted to be the major carrier.

- Which company won the race?
- How did this affect future industrial growth in Washington?



the great project. Ground was broken for the canal at Georgetown on July 4, 1828, by President John Quincy Adams.

That same day, 45 miles to the north in Baltimore, work began on another transportation project, the B & O Railroad. Supporters of the canal were confident that their work would be completed first and be more successful than an unproven railroad.

They were wrong on both counts. Difficulty in finding competent workers, widespread illness among laborers in the summer months, engineering problems, and periodic flooding of the Potomac delayed progress on the canal's construction. Additional time was lost and money spent on feuding among Alexandria, Georgetown, and Washington City over the canal's end point. The B & O Railroad reached Cumberland in 1842. By the time the canal reached Cumberland in 1850, the railroad had captured the grain trade of the Shenandoah Valley and nearly gained access to the Ohio Valley. Baltimore, not Washington, won this competition for commercial prosperity.

The waterway not only failed to make Washington a major trading city, but nearly caused bankruptcy for some residents and for the city itself. Delays in construction postponed revenues needed to pay off the loans, requiring increased taxes and borrowing. By 1834, the City of Washington was in debt to the amount of \$1,719,000. Congress relieved the capital by paying for the pur-

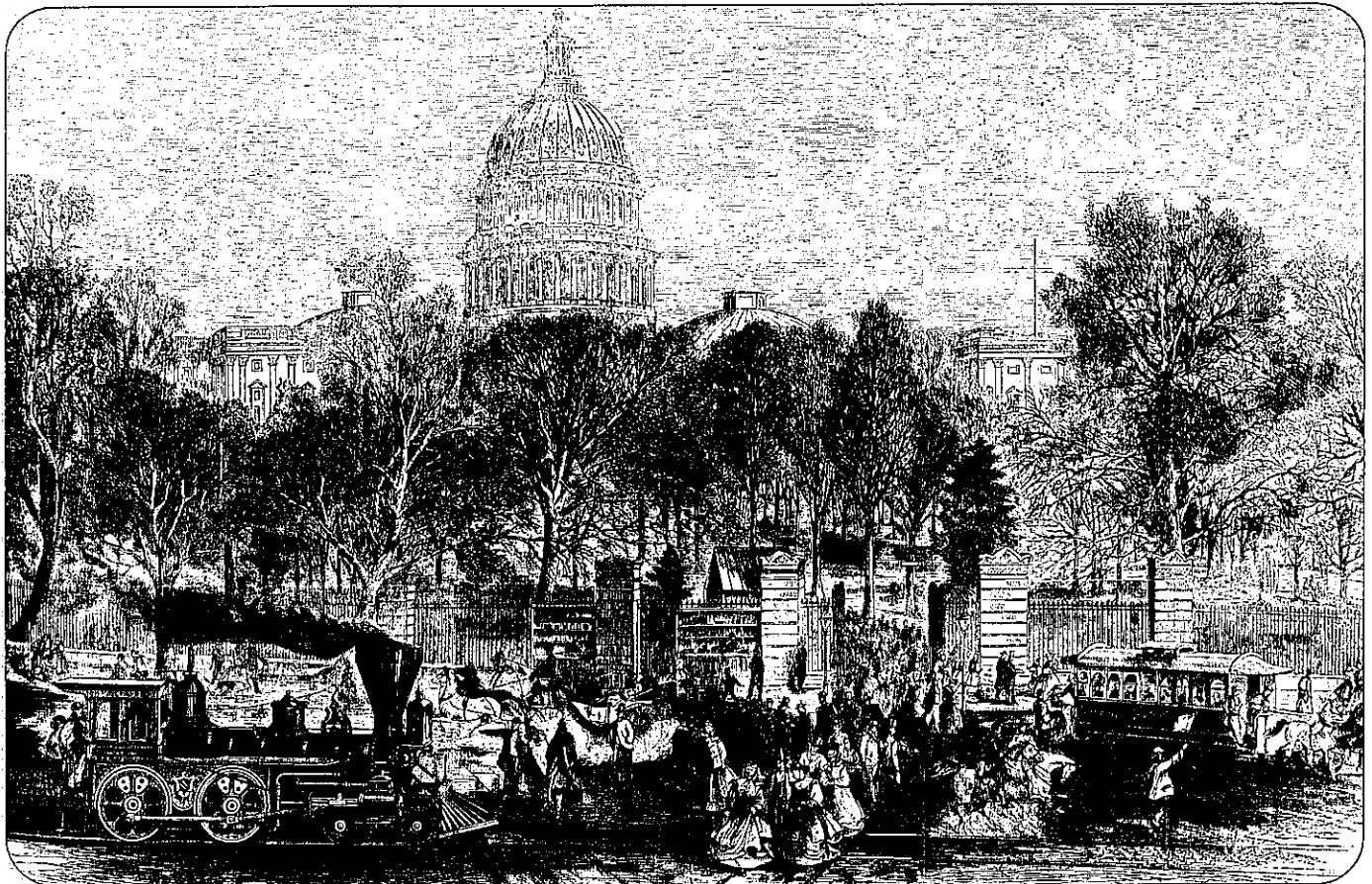
chase and dredging of the City Canal, which linked Washington with the C & O Canal. Most important, Congress took over Washington's interest payments and, in 1836, assumed all of the three District cities' canal debts. Economic collapse was averted, but the vision of a great national emporium of trade at the capital was dead.

Industrial Realities

Industry was slow to arrive in Washington. In the 1840s, several flour mills in Georgetown were equipped to use surplus water from the C & O Canal. The Pioneer Cotton Company opened in 1846 to manufacture cotton cloth for the local market. A brewery was established in the 1790s in Foggy Bottom, one of Washington's important industrial sections. In addition, there was a glass-manufacturing establishment, begun in 1807, that made high-quality glassware of all kinds, although it failed in the 1830s. During the 1840s Foggy Bottom attracted other industries because of

- What industries were located in the nation's capital during the period 1820–1860?

The railroad ran in front of the U.S. Capitol for about ten years during and after the Civil War.





Washington from the south bank of the Anacostia River in 1833

- Look again at the view on page 92. What would you see from these two spots today?

its closeness to the C & O and City canals and the river. Two lime kilns, Easby's Shipyard and Harman's Brewery, were in business in 1843. Other industrial activities came and went in the 1850s. They employed several hundred unskilled and semi-skilled workers.

Within the city an omnibus line with regular service between the Navy Yard and Georgetown opened in 1830. Similar in concept to today's buses or vans, these horse-drawn carryalls were Washington's first mass-transit vehicles. They enabled residents of distant parts of the city to communicate more easily with one another, even though the ride was rough.

Additional new means of transportation improved the capital's connections with other cities and other parts of the country. Steamboats began running south on the Potomac River after 1815. By 1821 steamboats ran between Washington and Norfolk. Regular steamboat transportation connected Georgetown, Washington,

and Alexandria before the 1830s. Even more important was the arrival of the B & O Railroad, bringing a direct rail tie with Baltimore, in 1835. A bitter quarrel in Congress postponed the running of a railroad between Washington and Alexandria until the Civil War. By 1860 steam power over water or on land dominated intercity transportation. After the B & O established its depot at New Jersey Avenue and C Street, NW, in 1852, steam locomotives could bring trains all the way into the city.

Another new industry affecting the lives of Washington's people during these years was the gas-light industry. After years of discussion and several experiments in lighting individual buildings, Congress appropriated \$17,500 in 1847 for the installation of a giant gas lantern atop the wooden Capitol dome. The apparatus worked for a time, giving off a strange glow that could be seen for miles. At night it lit the Capitol grounds and surroundings. In 1848, Congress decided that the lantern should be removed because of fears of fire.

In the same year, Congress chartered the Washington Gas Light Company. Revenues from stock sales enabled the company to erect a plant to generate gas from coal near 10th Street and the City Canal (the site of the Justice Department today). By the end of 1848, the company had laid gas mains and set up street lamps along Pennsylvania Avenue. It also installed gas lighting in the White House. Showing rapid growth, the Washington Gas Light Company in 1856 boasted of having 1,700 customers, more than 30 miles of gas mains, and about 500 street lights. It even had a gas plant with a large brick smokestack at the foot of Capitol Hill, where the Mall is today. Like many of the capital's industries, the gas company served local needs entirely.

The 1850s saw the decline of two major Washington industries. The federal arsenal in Southwest was reduced from a manufacturing armory to a storage depot, and at the Navy Yard, ship-building was ordered to be reduced and was finally eliminated in 1860 when the facility began manufacturing ship parts exclusively. A serious handicap to the Navy Yard was the silting up of the Eastern Branch, which made the shipyard inaccessible for larger naval vessels.

One bright spot in the industrial picture came in the field of publishing. In 1850 two printing firms were fairly sizable. One was capitalized at \$50,000 and operated four steam presses. The other

ROOMS TO RENT.

ONE Room on the 2d floor of my Auction House, fronting on Pennsylvania Avenue and 7th Street. Formerly occupied by D. A. Hall, Esq., well calculated for an Office.

ALSO,

Several well furnished Bed Rooms, in different buildings. Inquire of

SAM'L STETTINIUS.

Dec. 19. Auc. and Comm. Mercht.

BOARDING.

ONE or two Gentlemen may be furnished with commodious apartments, and board, if required, in a small private family, within five minutes' walk of the Capitol.

ALSO,

To Let, during the session of Congress, a good brick built Stable and Coach House.

Apply to H. R. TAYLOR, North A street, east of the Capitol. Nov. 26—dtf

I WILL sell or lease, Mount Hope, for a term of years. This beautiful residence is situated on the heights of Georgetown, near High street, within the Corporation of the town. The lot of ground on which the house stands, contains a great variety of fine fruit trees, shrubs and flowers—stable, carriage house, and every other convenience will be found attached to this establishment. For the beauty of prospects, pure air, and water, there is not a more desirable situation for a family in the District. The House contains ten rooms, besides the green-house, kitchen, cellar, grain room, dairy, closets, and garret, all finished in a suitable manner for a genteel family. Persons wishing to purchase, or rent, can call on the subscriber now at Mount Hope.

March 26—dtf **MARY T. TURNER.**

FOR RENT.

A CONVENIENT two story brick House, on Sixth street, south, between 13th and 14th street, near the residence of Capt. Howe. The house contains seven rooms beside cellar. For terms, apply to Mr. WATERS, next door, or to the subscriber's.

WM. WILSON.

Dec 21—law34

MRS. IRONSIDE informs the public that she has moved from her late residence, and has established herself on 7th street, in one of Mr. McLean's houses, where she can accommodate a small mess of Members of Congress.

Nov. 10—dtf

publisher had capital of \$35,000, operated six steam presses, and employed 80 workers.

By comparison to the rapid industrialization of many northern cities, Washington's industrial accomplishments were not impressive. This pattern persisted. Try as they might, the city's promoters could not attract heavy industry. The right combination of investment capital, location, resources, labor force, and aggressive enterprise was never present here. Washington's small-scale manufacturers served primarily to supply local needs for the products of light manufacturing. The city's performance as an industrial center between 1820 and 1860 disappointed its business leaders, and became, like the C & O Canal, another failed vision.

Although the capital lost out in the race for commerce and major industries, it was hospitable to other kinds of enterprises. Pre-Civil War businesses in Washington tended to be small. Their activities centered around the immediate community.

Boardinghouses and Hotels

Boardinghouses and hotels flourished, as they had from the city's founding. In 1841 approximately 30 hotels and 90 boardinghouses existed in the capital. Hotels centered around Pennsylvania Avenue between 1st and 15th Streets. Boardinghouses concentrated in the neighborhoods around Capitol Hill, the White House, Judiciary Square, and the Center Market. Two hundred and thirteen members of Congress lived in boardinghouses in 1841, paying an average daily rate of \$1.75 for room and meals.

A particular feature of boardinghouse life was the cooking. A congressman from Maine in 1835 wrote about the meals at Mrs. Hill's on Pennsylvania Avenue. For the 8:30 A.M. breakfast Mrs. Hill served coffee, green or black tea, beefsteak, mutton cutlet, sausage, hominy, buckwheat cakes or flapjacks, and corn cake or biscuits. The regular dinner, served about 5 P.M., included soup, roast beef, broiled turkey with oyster sauce, boiled ham, roast duck, puddings, tarts, and apples. Such fare was surely ample, though it could not be described as a balanced diet!

Of the hotels opened during this period, the Willard proved to be the best known and longest lasting. Henry Willard came to Washington in 1847 to manage a hotel at 14th Street and Pennsylvania Avenue. The venture was an immediate success, and in 1850 Willard enlarged and remodeled a row of houses into a single large hotel. A favorite with politicians, the Willard hosted

Advertisements published on January 7, 1832, in the *United States Telegraph*

- What kinds of accommodations are being offered?
- Compare these ads with those published in a modern Washington paper.

important social events and political meetings. In 1859 a party honoring the British ambassador attracted 1,800 guests, including President James Buchanan and his Cabinet. Prominent people of all sorts enjoyed staying at the Willard.

• What sorts of businesses flourished in the federal city before the Civil War?

Newspapers

The newspaper business also prospered in Washington, beginning with the *National Intelligencer* in 1800. This respected newspaper, edited at first by Samuel Harrison Smith and later by Joseph Gales and William W. Seaton, served the capital for nearly 70 years. Other early papers included the *Washington City Gazette* and the *Universal Gazette*. Among the important newspapers begun after 1820 were the *Globe*, *National Era*, *National Journal*, *Republic*, *Union*, and *United States Telegraph*. In 1852 a new era in Washington newspaper history began with the first issue of the *Evening Star*, a paper that became a strong advocate for the interests of the city and its residents. It served the capital until 1981. During the 1850s, following the invention of the telegraph, Washington became a national center for news gathering. Increasing numbers of newspaper correspondents came to the city to communicate the latest news of government happenings instantaneously to newspapers in other cities.

Small Businesses

Growth of the city's economy coincided with the near tripling of its population between 1840 and 1860. New residents required the services and products of a great variety of small businesses. Seventh Street near the busy Center Market became increasingly commercialized and was filled with dry goods and clothing stores. Market Space, facing the market between 7th and 9th Streets, was filled in with shops. Near the Patent Office, around 7th and F Streets, shops and offices of patent model makers, patent agents, and lawyers began to appear. In outlying neighborhoods not convenient to the Center Market, tiny, family-run grocery stores served local people. In 1845, at Mt. Vernon Square, between 7th, 9th, and K Streets and New York Avenue, the Northern Liberty Market opened to serve a rapidly growing residential section. These new businesses strengthened the city's economy by promoting trade and increasing opportunities for employment. Even more than this, they made Washington a more urban, interesting place, giving it vitality and widening the variety of goods and services available.

Free African Americans were among the city's independent

small-business proprietors. Although there were legal restrictions against black-owned businesses, the majority of black businesspeople operated services requiring few capital funds, if any. Some owned and drove carts or hackney carriages; women were mostly seamstresses and laundresses. A few accumulated money that they invested in barber shops, restaurants, or catering enterprises. Beverly Snow, for example, had a popular restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue. After he was driven out by the "Snow Riot" of 1835, the restaurant was reopened by Absalom Shadd, an African American who operated it for 20 years. He sold it for \$25,000. Alfred Jones ran a feed store valued at about \$16,000 in 1860. The resourcefulness of these and other black businesspeople gave strength and stability to Washington's African American community.

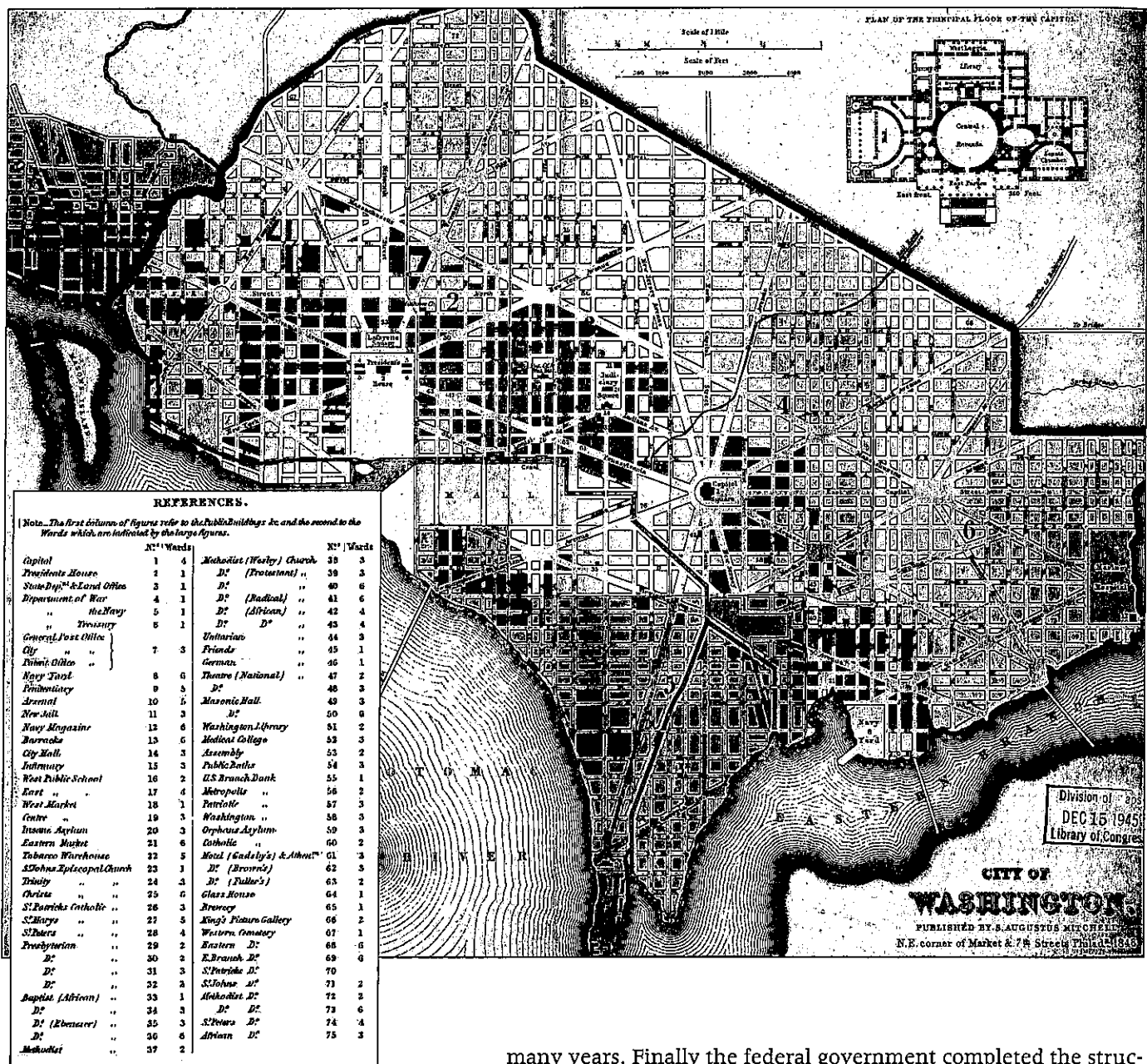
2. The City Government

Municipal Housekeeping

In 1820 Washington City received a new charter giving the local government greater authority than it had had before. It extended the right to vote to all white male property owners who paid at least 50 cents in taxes and had resided in the city for a year. It gave them the power to elect the mayor directly instead of having the council select him. But the new charter did not resolve the local government's chief problem—its financial poverty. Washington City had significant expenses. For example, in 1821 alone, \$43,000 was spent to improve or maintain the streets. Although the charter provided that the federal government would share in the cost of public improvements, Congress appropriated no funds for the purpose.

There was too little valuable private property in Washington to generate sufficient tax revenues, and the way taxes were collected and public funds distributed further increased financial problems. The city was divided into six wards in 1820; each ward collected its own taxes and spent the bulk of its funds within the ward. Thus, wards with the largest populations and wealth had much more money to spend than poorer wards. In 1832, for example, Wards 2 and 3 had more than half of the city's population and tax revenues. Their unfair system penalized less populated wards by denying them funds for schools or poor relief. To add to its financial problems, the local government in 1820 began construction of an expensive and beautiful City Hall at 5th and D Streets, NW. Unable to pay construction bills, the city left the building unfinished for

- What financial problems did the municipal government face?



• Using the key on this map in the section marked "References," what information can you extract about the City of Washington in 1848?

many years. Finally the federal government completed the structure and occupied part of it as a courthouse.

The problem of poor relief nagged the authorities and the taxpayers. A large portion of emergency relief came from private charitable societies. Public assistance never gave adequate support to people in temporary distress because of delays in public construction projects or economic depressions. Although enlarged by the city in 1815 to serve as a poorhouse and workhouse, the Washington Asylum quickly became overcrowded. Not only did the asylum house the local poor, but it had to accommodate destitute war veterans and others who came to the capital to press their claims

for government pensions. In the 1840s Congress agreed to provide medical care for poor people who were not Washington residents. In other ways during this decade Congress gave financial help to the city's relief efforts.

Limited home rule continued as the norm in Washington's local government. After four years of public discussion, Congress again modified the city charter in 1848. The property qualification for voting was removed, giving Washington white male **suffrage**, but the one-year residency requirement was retained. The charter also reduced slightly the municipal dependence on property tax revenues. In June 1848, about 2,800 men voted for Mayor William W. Seaton, giving him a fifth term as mayor. The turnout of voters was more than twice as large as it had ever been. Seaton, who served from 1840 until 1850, was surely the most popular and successful of the city's early elected mayors. His long term in office provided a continuity of policy and administration that was reassuring. A businessman respected in the community, he was close to Congress. Relations between the local government and Con-

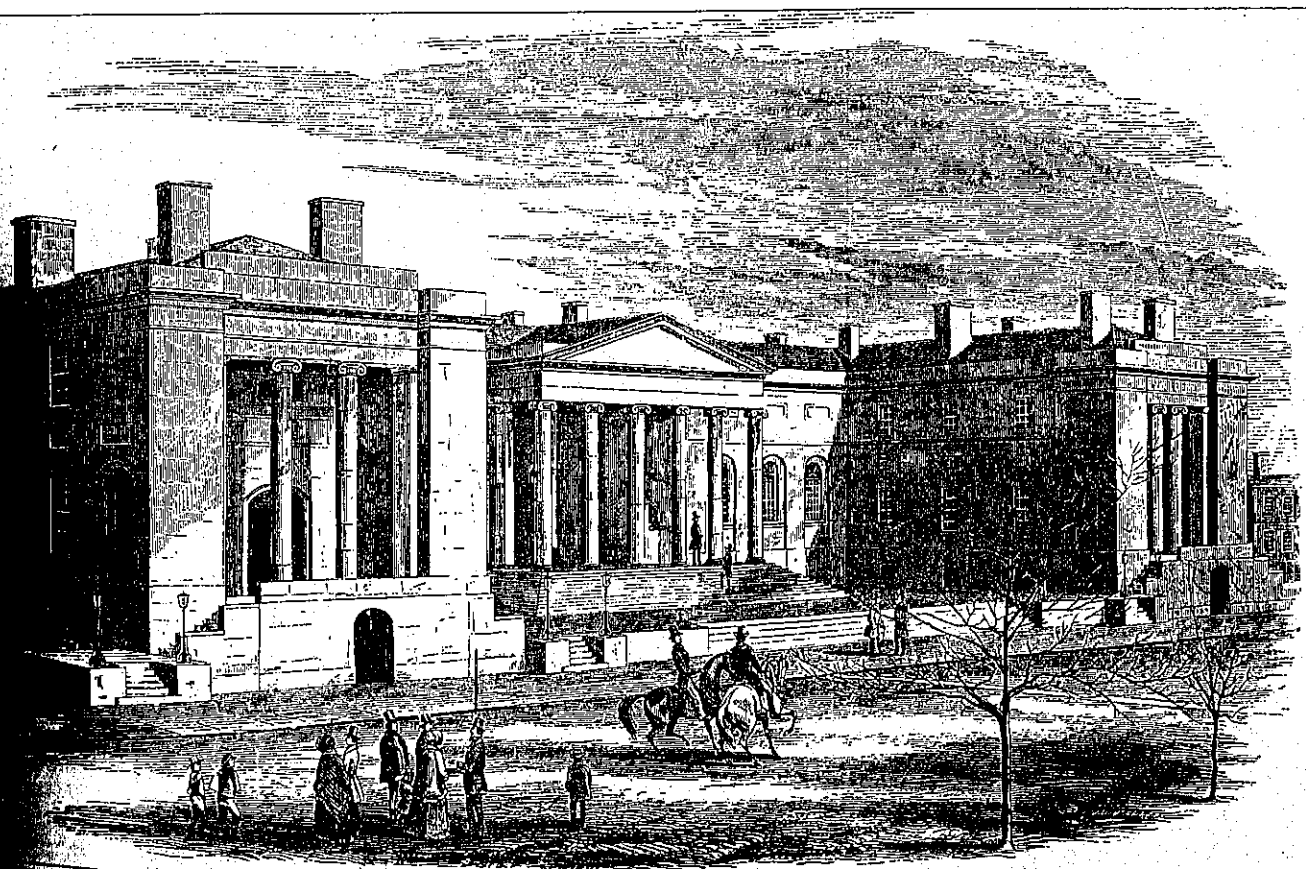
Notice Extraordinary.

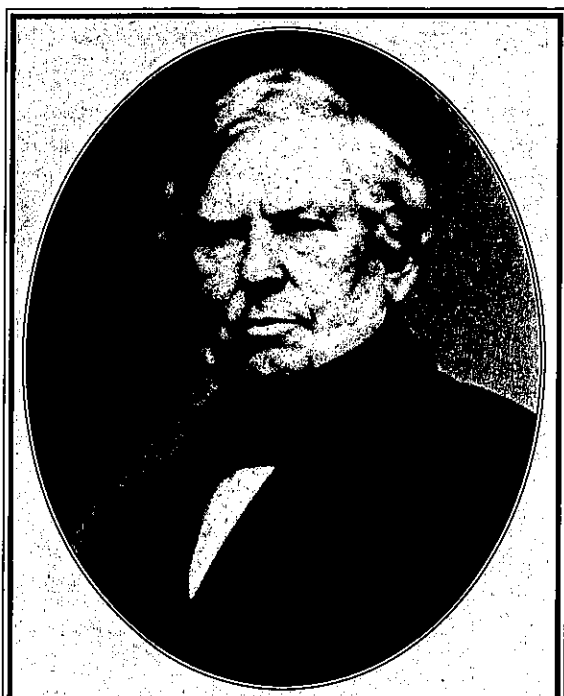
R. C. Weightman, a man of known liberal principles; all those who vote for this gentleman at tomorrow's election, will have general permission to sleep on the Benches in the Market House, this intense warm weather. May the curse of Dr. Slop light on all those who vote for Tom Carberry.

R. C. Weightman won the election. He served as mayor of the City of Washington from October 1824 to July 1827. His opponent, Tom Carberry, had been mayor from June 1822 to June 1824.

• Do you think that political advertising has changed since 1824?

The old City Hall was designed by George Hadfield. It still stands today, a symbol of the city's early ambitions.





WILLIAM WINSTON SEATON

William Seaton, born in Virginia, became one of Washington's most prominent citizens. From 1812 until 1864 he was co-owner and editor of an important newspaper, the *National Intelligencer*. He served as mayor of the city from 1840 until 1850, a time when the capital prospered. With his friends in Congress, Seaton was able to secure favorable action on many civic improvements. While he was mayor, the city expanded its public schools, built a new hospital, planned a water supply system, and authorized a gas works.

People admired Mayor Seaton for several reasons. Some appreciated his great dignity when he participated in civic ceremonies. Other people respected him for his ability as a newspaper editor. Because of the simple and humorous way he talked, his friends loved to hear him tell stories. One of his favorite pastimes was hunting. On the day of his funeral in 1866, the public schools and all the city offices were closed in his honor.

gress were never better than during Seaton's term. He also led the fight to improve public schools and public health care facilities.

Health and Sanitation

Some of the capital's most serious problems related to disease and the menaces of fire, crime, and violence. In this way the city had much in common with other American cities.

In 1832, a cholera epidemic swept Washington. It raged from the middle of August to the end of September. Thirty to seventy cases a day were reported, and its spread could not be stopped. There was nothing to do but stay inside and watch the "dead carts" roll by collecting their grim cargoes of dead bodies. "Bring out the dead!" was the doleful cry. Washington's doctors noticed that Irish and German laborers and the black population were especially hard hit. They did not know why this was so, nor did they understand how to treat the disease. Patients were bled and given doses of "calomel," a white tasteless salt, in three makeshift hospitals set

Causes of Death in Washington in 1830

Cause	Number of Cases	Cause	Number of Cases	Cause	Number of Cases
Apoplexy	5	Drunkenness	8	Liver Complaint	4
Asthma	1	Dysentery	8	Measles	28
Angina Pectoris	1	Decay	17	Old Age	5
Burn	3	Drowned	2	Pneumonia	16
Contusion	2	Fever	3	Pleurisy	7
Croup	2	puerperal	3	Palsy	2
Consumption	46	typhus	8	Salivation	2
Cholera Infantum	39	bilious	3	Still born	23
Convulsion	15	intermittent	15	Sudden [death]	9
Colic	2	Gravel	1	Scrofula	1
bilious	3	Gout	1	Teething	2
Cancer	1	Hemorrhage	1	Thrush	1
Drinking cold w'tr	3	Hooping Cough	6	Unknown	6
Dropsy	13	Inflamm. of brain	4	Worms	4
brain	9	Influenza	1	Wound	2
chest	1				
Children				160	
Adults				179	
Total				339	

In 1830, two years before the great cholera epidemic, 39 people were listed as having died of cholera. By 1832, 30 to 70 cases of cholera were being reported each day.

- Make a list of the other fatal diseases included here that you think are under control today.
- Are there any diseases that affect a greater proportion of the population now than in 1830? List them.

up in rented houses. Most victims simply died in their homes or in the streets.

Washington's streets, strewn with garbage and filth, were breeding grounds for cholera. The disease spread under crowded conditions, which helps explain why the poor and working classes were especially affected. City officials could not decide how to deal with this menace to public health. They saw no way of stopping citizens from the common practice of throwing trash into the streets. Although drainage systems were built for surface water runoff, sewage did not pass through them. Instead, sewage collected or ran into open streams, vacant lots, Tiber Creek, and the Washington Canal. Because of these unsanitary conditions, the city's death rate hovered around 35 per 1,000 people (nearly half of whom were children under a year old) during these years. This situation pointed out the need for improved sanitation and hospital facilities. Yet the city had no funds and few precedents for public action.

Fire and Police Protection

Fire was another serious problem. The Treasury and Post Office buildings were destroyed by fire in the 1830s. The city's volunteer fire companies could not put these, and many other fires, out. Often the volunteers did not have ready access to an adequate supply of water for fighting the fires. Another reason for the fire companies' failures was the immaturity of their members. Younger men often took over from adult men who no longer wanted to serve in this volunteer job. These youths turned the city's six fire engine houses into meeting places for their gangs. In other American cities, too, firehouse gangs amused themselves by turning in false alarms, by fighting each other instead of fires, and by starting fires for the fun of putting them out. The city council put up with this absurd situation until 1864, when it set up a salaried fire department under a fire chief and bought the necessary equipment.

The antics of the firehouse gangs represented one part of the increasing lawlessness in Washington between 1820 and 1860. Along with violent crime directed against individuals, neighborhood "crowds" made war against each other. More serious were political and racial riots. Workers on the Washington and Baltimore Railroad fought police in 1835. A few months later the city was turned upside down by a mob of white ruffians, many of them

- How did the local government provide for protection from crime?
- Why did Washington establish a professional fire department?

A PROCLAMATION.

MAYOR'S OFFICE,
Washington, Dec. 23, 1828.

WHEREAS it has been too much the habit of idle and inconsiderate persons, on Christmas and New Year's Day and Eve, to indulge in firing off guns, pistols, squibs, and crackers, and burning of gun-powder in divers other ways, to the great annoyance of the peaceable inhabitants of this city, and to the manifest danger of their persons and property—all which practices, where they are not contrary to the express ordinances of the corporation, amount to "disorderly conduct," and as such are punishable by law.

Now, therefore, with a view to prevent such disorderly practices, I, JOSEPH GALES, jr. Mayor of Washington, do enjoin upon all Police Constables, Ward Commissioners, and others, whose duty it is to preserve peace and good order, to be diligent in the execution of their several duties, and to apprehend and bring to justice all persons so offending against the laws.

Given under my hand, at the City of Washington, this 23d day of December, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and twenty-eight.
Dec. 24— JO. GALES, jr. Mayor.

These recollections by William A. Gordon are about his childhood in Georgetown before the Civil War. He shared them with local historians. This section is about crime in his neighborhood.

As the boys grew older there was much fighting between the "crowds" living in different sections of the town, and between the boys of Washington and Georgetown. It was dangerous for a boy from one section of the town to venture alone into another, an attack and sometimes severe beating being the almost invariable result, the free use of stones adding an additional danger. Crowds from one part of the town would invade another part, armed with sticks and stones, and shrieking party cries. At first the march was unopposed, but rapidly the boys of the invaded district gathered and drove the enemy from the field. The severest conflicts, however, were between the boys of the two cities

of Washington and Georgetown at the Paper Mill Bridge over Rock Creek, for possession of which they fought with great desperation. As there were only two or three constables to preserve peace by day and a like number of watchmen to guard property by night, these encounters were seldom interfered with. In our part of the town the constable was a large, powerful, dark-featured man, who was believed to have been a circus performer and to have killed [a] man. All the boys were afraid of him and would retire into the house on his approach. The night watchman was a small, round, jolly man, with kind words to the children, who were fond of [him] and regarded him as their protector. He patrolled the town by night and called out the hours: "One o'clock, a fair bright night, all's well," or "Four o'clock, a sharp cold morning, all's well. . . ."

on strike, who took out their frustrations on African Americans in Washington. More disturbing to Congress were the "gangs of rowdies" who, in 1841, protested President Tyler's veto of a bank bill by entering the White House grounds and shouting insults at the president.

There were many reasons for violence in the city during the 1830s and 1840s. Cities everywhere were growing rapidly, changing, and attracting people from different backgrounds. People who hoped to better themselves economically but failed to achieve their goals often blamed other groups. Feeling insecure and threatened, they struck out against people who seemed to oppose their advancement. The capital's economic instability added to the tensions between white and black people, and between natives and immigrants.

The city's six **constables** could not hope to keep the peace in a city that numbered more than 23,000 people in 1840. Besides their small numbers, the constables tended to be chosen from among the mayor's friends. Pay for the officers was only \$100 per year, but they added to their salaries by collecting fees. For example, an officer pocketed 75 cents for every person taken to the workhouse and 50 cents for every slave punished with a public whipping. The fee system encouraged Washington's police to crack down on the

city's lower classes but did nothing to ensure fair administration of justice.

In 1842, after the White House rowdies incident, an Auxiliary Guard was created "for the protection of public and private property in the city of Washington." Consisting of 15 officers supervised by a captain appointed by the mayor, the guard was paid well from federal funds. This force was to keep the peace at night while the constables still did duty during the day. At first, these measures were successful. Washington's police kept another racially motivated mob from doing serious damage in 1848. In 1851 the city council gave its expanded police a pay increase and eliminated the fee system. With enlargement of the Auxiliary Guard at the same time, the city had 57 officers on its police force.

3. The Federal Presence

The Retrocession of Alexandria

In 1846 the federal district lost one-third of its total area. The whole part of the District of Columbia ceded by Virginia to the federal government in 1789 was returned by the process of **retrocession**. This land included the city of Alexandria and Alexandria County, or what is now Arlington County, Virginia.

Leading citizens of Alexandria had joined the federal district enthusiastically. They expected to gain important commercial ben-

- *Why did the citizens of Alexandria want to return to Virginia?*

A letter written to Gerrit Smith, Esq., an abolitionist in Peterboro, New York, from two black residents of Alexandria who feared what would happen if retrocession took place. The letter was probably written in 1846.

- *Describe in your own words the reasons given for resettlement in a free state.*

[F]ancy but for a moment you could have seen them on the day of election when the act of Congress retroceding them to Virginia should be rejected or confirmed, whilst the citizens of this city and county were voting god's humble poor were standing in rows on either side of the courthouse and as the votes were announced every quarter of an hour the suppressed wailing and lamentations of the people of color were constantly ascending to god for help and succor in their hour of need.

... Oh see, there never was such a time here before.

We have been permitted heretofore to meet together [sic] in god's sanctuary which we have erected for the purpose of religious worship, but wheather [sic] we shall have this priviledge when the Virginia laws are extended over us we know not. We expect that our schools will all be broken up. Our privileges which we have enjoyed for many years will all be taken away. The Laws of Virginia can hardly be born(e) by thos(e) colored people that have been brought up in a state of Ignorance and the deepest subjugation. But of see how is it with us who have enjoyed comparative liberty. . . . In the spring forty of fifty colored families would be glad to leave for some free state where they can educate there [sic] children and worship god without molestation. . . .

Moses Hepburn
Phillip Hamilton

efits from associating with the great new capital. They did not expect to lose substantial political power and influence by being unrepresented in a state or national legislature. Commercially, Alexandria prospered briefly, like Georgetown and Washington City, but then the little city **stagnated**. Disputes over the C & O Canal put Alexandria in competition with the other ports in the District of Columbia. An expensive connecting canal had to be built to tie Alexandria to the canal and its western traffic.

Alexandrians blamed their misfortunes on Congress and the capital. The national legislature had little interest in a far corner of the federal district on the other side of the Potomac River. Merchants and traders who expected to become rich because of their location in the national capital were disappointed. Denied representation in a legislature and the right to vote for president, they felt isolated. Alexandria's voters sent numerous petitions to Congress asking for the return of Virginia's land to that state. Finally in 1846, they petitioned the Virginia Assembly to be taken back and the state agreed to the action.

Alexandria petitioners cited two principal reasons for wanting to return to Virginia. First, the federal government had no need for the land south of the Potomac River. The government's buildings and activities were all situated north of the river. Second, Alexandria had gained no economic advantages by being included in the District of Columbia and it had lost important political advantages. There was a third reason, not stated, for Virginia to want Alexandria back: the slave trade which flourished in the little city. By removing Alexandria from congressional authority, Virginia would eliminate any temptation by reformers in Congress to tamper with Alexandria's slave dealers. Besides protecting its interests in the trade, retrocession gave Virginia's slaveholders two additional representatives in the Virginia Assembly. Voters in Alexandria County, as distinct from those in the city, opposed being returned to Virginia, but they were outvoted.

Federal Aid to Washington

Washington's mayor, city councilmen, and taxpayers complained year after year that the federal government was not paying its fair share of expenses for running the city. The federal government, they said, had burdened the local government with unnecessary costs. The simplest maintenance of the city's vast street system, for example, was far beyond the city's means. In

- *How was the federal presence, both economic and physical, felt in Washington?*

THE QUESTION OF A FEDERAL PAYMENT

When federal officials and local citizens have debated the issue of how much control District residents should have over their local government, the issue of money is usually involved.

The federal government has always owned a large percentage of the land in the District of Columbia, on which it does not pay taxes. This means less money in the city treasury. The question has always been, How much responsibility does the federal government have to help finance the local government of the nation's capital?

• *These statements illustrate how some people felt about this issue before 1860. Arguments that sound like these can still be read in the newspapers today. Check recent newspapers for articles about the federal payment. Clip them out and start a classroom scrapbook. Under each entry, write a brief description of the arguments for or against the federal payment, being careful to list whether the person making the argument represents the federal government or local interests.*

"Mr. Gregg: . . . He thought Government ought to protect and encourage [improvement of the capital] as far as encouragement could be given, without resorting to taxes on the other citizens of the United States. He never would agree to let his constituents [those who voted for him in his home state] be taxed one single cent, to be laid out on improvements in the city, farther than what might be necessary to erect, and keep in repair, suitable buildings for the accommodation of Government."

—*Annals of Congress*, 7C, 2S, p. 495, February 1803

"The plan of this city was formed by the public authorities, the dimensions of the streets determined by them. . . . It is a plan calculated for the magnificent capital of a great nation; but oppressive, from its very dimension and arrangements, to the inhabitants, if its execution . . . is to be thrown on them. No people who

anticipated . . . support of it out of their own funds would ever have dreamed of forming such a plan. . . .

"The Committee are of opinion that the government was bound by every principle of equal rights and justice to pay a proportion of the expense incurred upon this subject, equal to the amount of property which it held . . . and this would have been greatly more than half. . . ."

—*Senator Samuel Southard in the Southard Report, the first formal argument for a regular federal payment*

"I know very well that most people in the cities of Washington and Georgetown live from the drippings of the Treasury. . . . These demands on the Treasury—the people's money—for purposes of expenditure in the cities of Washington and Georgetown are shameful. . . ."

—*Senator Brodhead of Pennsylvania in opposing the repair of Long Bridge, owned by the federal government*

"At the last session of Congress there were over four million dollars appropriated, to be expended within 12 months, in the District of Columbia . . . [before long] the Federal Treasury will have to feed and clothe the citizens."

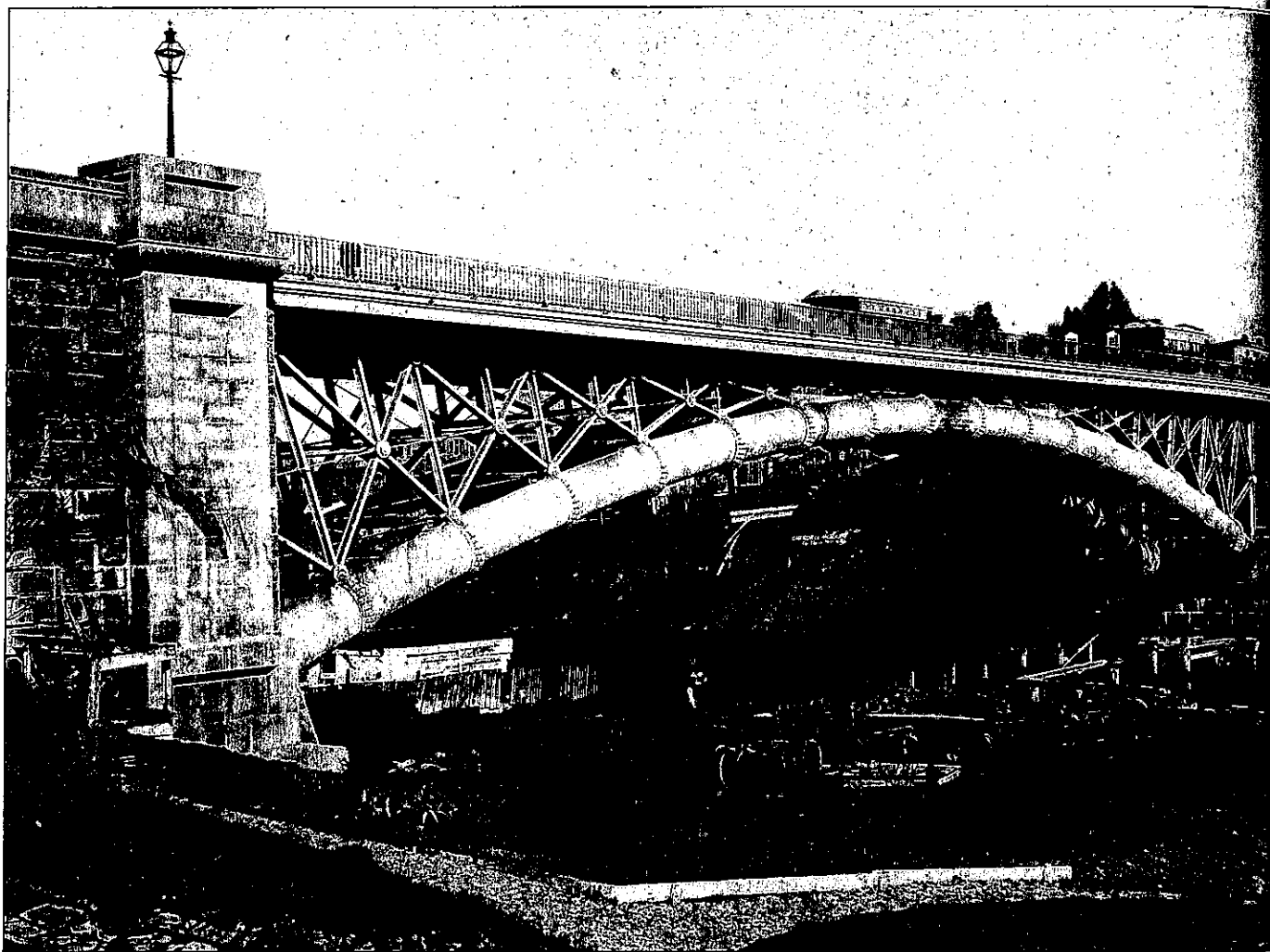
—*Senator Iverson of Georgia, commenting on the expenses involved in building extensions to the Capitol, a new Capitol dome, other federal buildings, and an aqueduct to improve the city's water supply*

" . . . the city has, from first to last opened and made more than fifty miles of avenues and streets, at a cost of about one million and a half dollars. It may safely be affirmed that no city, in proportion to its population and wealth, has done more for itself than Washington, notwithstanding nearly one half of the property within its limits belongs to the government and is not subject to taxation."

—*Commissioner of Public Buildings for the District of Columbia, defending the city against charges of overspending*

In addition, federal interests had removed vast portions of land in the city from the tax rolls, cutting available revenues. By 1830 the local government was deeply in debt.

The capital's financial woes led to a congressional investigation. A committee headed by Senator Samuel Southard of New Jersey issued a report on the city's finances in 1835. It was a thorough study that showed the need for federal assistance to the City of



General Montgomery Meigs of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers called the Washington Aqueduct "a fitter monument to (George Washington's) name than obelisk or statue."

• *Why do you think he said that, and do you think this picture confirms his opinion?*

Washington. It argued that the capital's debts stemmed from the burdens imposed by Congress on the local government. The city government, the committee found, spent an average of \$26,000 per year just building and repairing Pierre L'Enfant's oversized streets and avenues. Some of the inflated costs resulted from the city's layout on such a grand scale. Additional expenses included buying or building market houses, infirmaries, and pumps. The Southard report agreed with complaints that the capital's tax base had been reduced by the federal government. The committee finally recommended that the city and federal governments should share in the maintenance of Washington's streets "in proportion to their respective interests."

Unfortunately, no immediate solution to the capital's financial problems resulted from the Southard report. Not for another 40

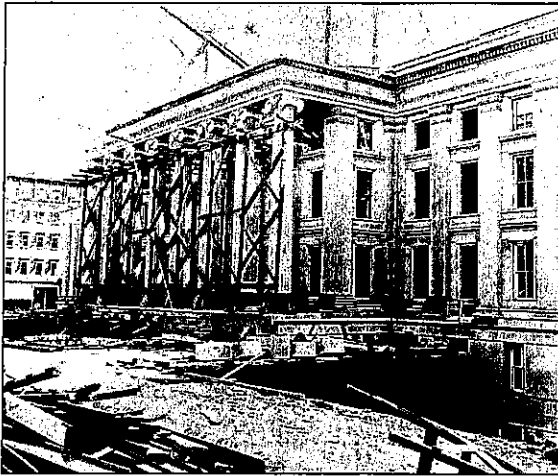
years did Congress consider a formula for aiding the capital. From time to time federal authorities provided emergency assistance to the city or supported specific projects to improve harmful conditions. A good example of emergency aid was the assumption by Congress of the District of Columbia debts for the C & O Canal. An example of the federal government's willingness to share essential costs was its periodic payment for improvement of Pennsylvania Avenue. Another important aid to the city was federal construction and operation of the Government Hospital for the Insane (St. Elizabeth's Hospital), which opened in 1855. For the first time, professional treatment of the mentally ill was available in Washington with no financial obligation to the city.

Of all the assistance given by federal projects to the city, the most important single improvement was the city water supply system. Through the 1850s, most residents of central Washington used spring water from several sources piped into public hydrants or pumps. This limited supply of water could not possibly serve adequately for fire protection. It was in the federal government's own interest to preserve its property from fire. After extensive surveys, construction of a water system was authorized in 1853.

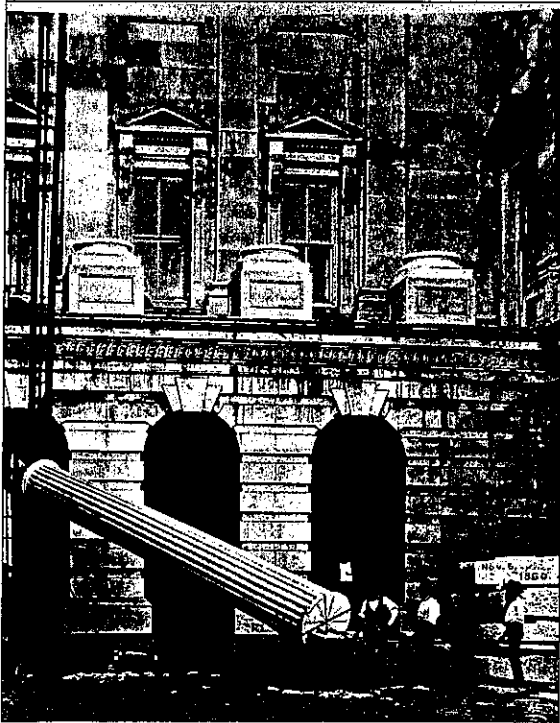
The system, as planned, consisted of a dam on the Potomac River above Great Falls and an enormous 9-foot diameter **conduit** from Great Falls to reservoirs at Dalecarlia and Georgetown, plus other water mains and connections. Montgomery C. Meigs of the Army Corps of Engineers designed and supervised construction of the system. The job cost more than \$2 million and dragged on for years because of low appropriations. Potomac River water first reached Washington in 1863. With the opening of the Washington Aqueduct and its distributing system, one of the capital's most serious limitations was resolved. Like other American towns growing into cities, Washington was beginning to see the beneficial results of technological change. Elsewhere, in Philadelphia, New York, or Boston, municipal engineering advanced rapidly. In the capital, the difference was that new developments were stimulated by federal rather than local influences.

The Federal Government Expands

Despite more than a half-century of efforts to broaden the capital's economic base, Washington remained primarily a government city in 1860. A significant measure of growth lay in the number of



The Treasury Building under construction



New extensions at the U.S. Capitol

Numbers of Federal Employees in Washington, 1821–1861

Year	Number
1821	603
1831	666
1841	1,014
1851	1,533
1861	2,199

federal employees. Federal employment provided a stable foundation for the city's economy by giving people steady incomes. Their purchasing power, in turn, supported merchants and other businesspeople. Expansion of federal employment occurred because the country grew and needed more civil servants to manage the postal system, the monetary system, the armed services, and new functions as they developed over the years.

Another measure of federal expansion could be found in the increase in the number of government buildings in Washington. Several major building projects changed the city's appearance. In the 1830s, two disastrous fires left two federal departments homeless. The Treasury Department near the White House burned in 1833. Then in 1836 the Post Office Department, housed along with the Patent Office in old Blodgett's Hotel, burned to the ground. These fires led to construction of three important, monumental new buildings.

The Treasury Building was under construction for more than 30 years. The east and central wings were erected between 1836 and 1842, from a plan by architect Robert Mills. Designed in the then-fashionable Greek Revival, or classical, style, the building featured a long row of massive columns. The new Treasury Building was somewhat mistakenly placed in the middle of Pennsylvania Avenue, interrupting the direct view between the White House and the Capitol that had been a major feature of L'Enfant's original plan. Work continued on the Treasury Building from 1855 to 1869 until eventually it filled the entire block along 15th Street east of the White House.

Construction began in 1836 on the south wing of a new building to house the Patent Office on the large block bounded by 7th and 9th, and by F and G Streets, NW. Robert Mills, a man who managed construction of four nineteenth-century public buildings in Washington, was the supervising architect. Built first of tan-colored sandstone quarried in nearby Virginia, the south wing now looks different from the rest of the building, which is mostly white marble. The design of the Patent Office, like that of the Treasury Building, is strongly classical. The east, west, and north wings of the building, constructed in succession, were all completed by 1867. A popular feature of the original structure—an exhibit gallery in which the public could view small models of patented mechanical inventions—was destroyed by a major fire in 1877.

Later restored, it may be seen today as part of the exhibits of the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of American Art, which together occupy the building.

Between 1839 and 1842, Robert Mills designed and oversaw construction of the new General Post Office building. Located south of the Patent Office between 7th and 8th, and E and F Streets, NW, it occupied the site of the old Blodgett's Hotel. The General Post Office, again in classical architectural style, featured the new "fireproof" construction techniques that Mills promoted. Additions in 1855 doubled its size. Today the least known of Mills's Washington buildings, the General Post Office was considered during his lifetime to be his best design.

Perhaps the most important advance in government building during the mid-nineteenth century was the enlargement of the U.S. Capitol. Many new states had entered the Union since 1800, and Congress had outgrown the original meeting chambers of the House of Representatives and the Senate. In 1851 President Millard Fillmore laid cornerstones for two new wings—the so-called extensions to the Capitol building. Designed by Thomas U. Walter, the construction and decoration of the extensions was overseen by both Walter and by U.S. Army engineer Montgomery Meigs. The new House chamber opened for use in 1857, and the Senate in 1859. Italian mural painter Constantino Brumidi decorated the interior of the large, reconstructed, cast-iron dome for the Capitol when it was completed in 1863.

New federal construction at this time not only set a style in government architecture that persisted into the mid-twentieth century, but it also provided jobs. Construction of these large, important buildings employed hundreds of laborers and skilled craftsmen for decades. Once completed, the structures provided work space for hundreds of additional clerks and department staff members. Further, as massive, handsome buildings, they reaffirmed the federal government's commitment to Washington as a permanent home.

FOR REVIEW

1. Explain why Washington did not develop into a great commercial city. Give at least three different reasons.
2. List the industries and businesses that were successful in the federal city during the 1820-1860 period. Describe how each was dependent on Washington as the nation's capital.
3. How did the city government deal with the following problems?
financial problems
relief for the poor
disease
fire
crime and violence
4. Draw a map of the District of Columbia as it existed prior to 1846. Label each area. Shade in the area retroceded to Virginia. Make a title and key for the map.
5. What was the Southard report and what recommendations did it make?

BE CREATIVE

Make a scrapbook detailing city services today. Find some news articles about how the city deals with problems related to health, fire, police, schools, and welfare. As you go through this textbook you will read about these services for each period. Compare what is happening today with the services in the past. Keep working on your scrapbook.

OR

Write the script for a "live and unrehearsed" television debate among a citizen of Alexandria, a citizen of Washington City, and a member of Congress for which the topic is "Retrocession: Yea or Nay." The questions will be asked by newspaper reporters for the *National Intelligencer* and other local papers.